attuned to nuance, as shown when he mentions that Adams may have had more press support than did Jackson (136). And in an era which arouses a surprising level of partisanship among academics, Parsons remains fairly neutral. This reviewer felt that Parsons leans slightly in favour of John Quincy Adams – but other reviewers have felt the opposite. It is also well written, with interesting and meaningful quotes scattered throughout the text – see Jackson's description of anti-slavery agitation as "the wicked design of demagogues" (63).

This is not to say that this is a perfect book. Its impressive brevity causes problems, including oversimplification, particularly in the epilogue where President Jackson is described as having "ignored" *Worcester* v. *Georgia* (193) – when, strictly speaking, the ruling only applied to Georgia. There is a neglect of fruitful lines of research, as with Indian Removal where the link to Jackson's overwhelming support in slave states (the land in dispute was mostly in "slave states") is not really made clear, leaving readers with the misleading impression it was only a major electoral issue in Georgia (155–56). Inevitably, the importance of the 1828 election in setting up a two-party system in 1836 is exaggerated. This reviewer finds it a bit too deferential to the academic consensus – see its suggestion that Adams's press support was less significant and partisan than Jackson's (134). Some comments are open to question, as when he appears to ridicule the notion that a "Unitarian" would threaten the separation of church and state (175), when in fact the Unitarians were one of the few denominations in the US with a recent history of established churches.

Regardless, this is an excellent summary and is rightfully the standard work on this fascinating election. It is also accessible enough for undergraduates, who often find this a particularly baffling period.

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Journal of American Studies, **44** (2010), 2. doi:10.1017/S0021875810000800

Elizabeth Varon, *Disunion: The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789–1859* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008, $28.95). Pp. 347. ISBN 978 0 8078 3232 5.

By 6 March 1857, only a dullard could have missed the intense sectionalism consuming local and national politics in the United States. But avoiding the blistering rhetoric swirling around that day was impossible. As Elizabeth Varon describes in her captivating study of the oft-invoked and eventually unavoidable spectre of disunion, *Disunion: The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789–1859*, the Dred Scott decision, handed down that morning, highlighted these tensions and underscored how fragile bonds had become between North and South. But the case was most notable for its "explosive potential" in the ongoing war of words. Southerners celebrated Chief Justice Roger Taney's invocation of the Constitution in affirming the universal "right of property in a slave." That is, supporters of slavery rejoiced in the linguistic and legal connection between the nation's founding documents and the institution that was tearing the nation apart, declaring that opposing the ruling was tantamount to "treason." Accordingly, northerners condemned the decision as "extralegal,

gratuitous, unprecedented and illegal." Many, including Supreme Court Justice Benjamin Curtis, worried aloud that the case had brought the nation to "the brink of a precipice." It is that ominous threat of the "precipice" that Varon explores in *Disunion*, exploring how events like the Scott legal decision had a rhetorical history and impact all their own.

In the process of recasting moments like these – the Missouri Compromise, the Virginia slavery debates, John Brown's raid and others – Varon's study breathes new life into our understanding of the antebellum era. As Varon's book convincingly describes, from the moment the motley crew of thirteen former colonies united, internal anxieties over the strength and wisdom of these national bonds threatened the fledgling republic. In other words, it was not only John C. Calhoun who was crying wolf, threatening again and again to disband the United States. Rather, Varon's extensive research exposes countless examples, North and South, where Americans resorted to the threat of disunion. However, Varon's book is no mere catalog of citations. Certainly, Varon proves that threats of disunion came from every segment of the political spectrum, from the beginning of Union to the very moment these threats became reality. But, more crucially, *Disunion* reveals the divisive atmosphere of mistrust which infused all manner of antebellum debate, underscoring the fundamental incompatibility of slavery and the American republic.

Varon's book is filled with concise and effective writing. In other words, *Disunion* is not a difficult book to comprehend, but its simplicity makes it no less profound. Varon's purpose, she explains, is to "analyze what the participants said, what they believed, and how they expressed their passions, and agonies, as they set the Union on the road to war" (2). This final piece is the most crucial, for Varon's characters, from the shrewd Calhoun to the most ignorant newspaper hacks, had specific political purposes when they threatened "disunion," just as they sometimes unwittingly and often consciously moved the United States closer to its devastating civil war. The result is a powerful tale that speaks to the intertwining of overt political goals and subconscious national drift, a process that, Varon ably demonstrates, contributed incredible momentum, which built slowly and surely over some seventy years, to the "coming of the American Civil War."

Disunion is a book about language, but Varon's research and her clear analysis allow even the stodgiest reader to believe that these words both denoted and connoted a great deal for their audiences and were meant to do so. Discussing the rhetorical aftermath of the Civil War in her epilogue, Varon's study makes powerful suggestions for future scholarship. Language remained important and the rhetoric of disunion took on a second life in reunionist and Lost Cause camps. As Varon powerfully intones, "in the new century, a true Union would have to be imagined, and fought for, all over again" (347). As her book so powerfully demonstrates, that would be not only a fight of legal cases, political movements, and sometimes even bloodshed, but also one where words always meant a great deal. While historians utilize and deploy these words, we are often at a loss to describe their history, uses, and manipulations. Varon's work proves that this history, one that marries rhetoric to events, can illuminate dark corners of the antebellum narrative and carry lessons into the present day.

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